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ABSTRACT

In the recent social revolution, rebellious middle-class youth attacked and rejected, among other values, the American middle-class belief in the worthwhileness of work. Although this recent humanistic revolt hardly affected the patterns of working life in America, it influenced attitudes toward work not only among middle-class adolescents and youth but also among blue-collar workers. One of the needs made apparent by the humanistic revolt is the need for meaningful work roles, through which youth can actualize their humanistic ideals in practical ways. The next era of history should be concerned with providing, for liberal middle-class youth as well as for the poor, satisfying work roles that do not require prolonged and expensive college education. (Author.MK)

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304

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2

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Humanism and the American Work Ethic

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Work has been the lot of most of mankind always, at first to wrest survival from nature and since then to improve the conditions of life. While a minority of people have acquired the means to forego a working life, the vast majority in the developed countries are dependent upon the benefits of work.

For the middle classes in America, work became a value that was incorporated into the character of decency, respectability, and moral rectitude. The benefits of a work ethic in a middle-class value system were the attainment of future security and social status better than that of one's parents and a life-style of self-reliance rather than familial dependency.

Even though efforts to escape work have been present here as elsewhere, nonetheless, Americans have acquired the worldwide, often unenvied, reputation of being the hardest working people on earth. The attainment of this productive capacity in society and its members is not easy, for it requires a huge educational system and a social value system geared toward training youth away from the primacy of the pleasure principle and toward the "work personality."

While the common assumption

is that people work because they have to, those who deal with the mentally ill and with persons who have other forms of vocational disability know only too well that the mere need to work does not get these people working. The intrapsychic change that must take place before they are actually able to work often requires a recapitulation of the whole development process that did not succeed the first time.

The point we wish to make is that the work personality is the end result of a long educational process and an upbringing in a work-valuing society. Children want to work when they see adults in the society enjoying their working life. It is principally through the identification with adult models and their values and through the practiced application of their attitudes and behaviors that young children first learn to do work.

The same is still true later when, as adolescents, they approach the time of change from childhood to youth. In taking on an adult identity, they usually choose the working role models that fit their coming needs.

As Erikson put it, the compact majority ordinarily combines the existent "dominant techniques with their identity development and become what they do." However, we have just been through about six years of a social revolution in which the rebellious youth culture attacked and rejected a good many of the values that make up the patterns of American middle-class life-style.

The humanistic revolution had many targets and was itself a coming together of both the overprivileged and the underprivileged, who, to quote Erikson

again, "in revolutionary times . . . often reach out to each other, both being marginal to the vast consolidation of the compact majority."

Most of the unquestionable values of the dominant society came under attack: education, technology, industry, government per se, capitalism, the war, science, money, comfort, security, the worthwhileness of work—indeed, the worthwhileness of effort at all and even the worthwhileness of keeping sane.

In place of an ethic of reason and responsibility, there was substituted the ethic of pleasure and responsibility only to oneself. Nothing of the past had any relevance. All models of adulthood were unworthy of imitation, for they represented a life-style of slavery to empty materialism in the service of a depersonalization of the human being under the heel of an ever-growing bureaucratic-technological monstrosity.

The violence of the social revolution has abated, perhaps because of the counterviolence it provoked, the aging of its leaders, and the ineffectiveness of its methods. The relative calm at present permits us to survey the scene with less perplexity and to sort out a little better what was racial, what was economic, what was affluence, and what was purely political, and what was sheer adolescence.

The whole movement was not without its effects, however. Witness the influence it has indeed had upon the educational system, the religions in America, minority rights, women's rights, the freedom of greater choice in individual life-styles, and perhaps even politics and government indirectly. Although it has hardly affected at all the available patterns of working life to which it took such ob-

jection, it has had a growing influence on attitudes toward work, to which we will refer later.

During the height of the humanistic revolt, we studied the personality patterns of middle-class adolescents and youth, both those observable at large and those under clinical care, noting that during that period adolescent turmoil and hospitalization had increased to proportions never seen before.

Indeed, the whole field of adolescent psychiatry has burgeoned over the past decade. Can this be pure coincidence, or must not this be an indicator of the disorganizing effects of the disorganization of social structures? Blos described this social disorganization as a "psychonoxious influence" that contributed to adolescent psychopathology.

During this period, we observed (in addition to the humanistic flowerhood of youthful elite described by Keniston) adolescents in hospitals displaying all ranges of personality pattern pathology and ego weakness. An attitude common to all was a disdain for work, not only among those for whom work was quite unnecessary because of family affluence but also among those for whom it was necessary.

Moreover, when one got below the surface, one also found that frequently there was no ability to work—no capacity for commitment to tasks that were necessary and not pleasurable, no ability to identify with aims and goals that go beyond immediacy. As far as these young people were concerned, the social aim of producing work personalities had failed.

Probably these patients represent the sickest end of a spectrum but they were all part of a social movement that had turned against

the American work ethic. Undoubtedly, those with the best ego integration will in the future adapt in some ways to reality, while those who are too damaged will join the population of chronic patients and welfare-dependent unemployed.

The winding down of the war in Vietnam and the subsidence of violent militancy have not changed the social issues these adolescents reflected: the fragmentation of life (of which working life is a prime component) into dehumanized and demeaning processes not worthy of a lifetime of effort; the separation of man from the product of his work.

Moreover, it is not only the affluent middle-class youth who now rebel against this life. There has also been an awakening among the masses of blue-collar workers, whose financial responsibilities to family tie them to their meaningless jobs. The dissatisfaction with the endless rat race is now surfacing more and more. We believe that the present quietude is illusory, born of a temporary relief from the conflict of the past six years.

It is said we are at the end of a historical period and that the character of the next period is not yet discernible. The humanistic revolt attempted to point the way by announcing the needs: the next era *should* be concerned with rehumanizing the quality of life in the post-technocratic society, rather than allowing the mere proliferation of the techniques of the possible to dictate what human beings shall become. The problems of work need to be looked at within this context.

Young people need adult models whose lives are examples of

sufficient satisfaction at work and at home, in a society of sufficient safety and fairness, to inspire emulation in youth and to provide youth with the bridges needed to become like those adults. These identifications are the necessary lodestone to *becoming*, around which the partial identifications of earlier life phases can coalesce in practical ways, and against which opposing tendencies can be tested and abandoned.

Without this lodestone, youth have only each other, and their fantasies, to identify with. We have just seen what happens to a generation of young people who reject their adult models as unworthy and who cannot, therefore, resolve their residual childhood ambivalences and hostilities.

A huge proportion of our youth are now being channeled into more and more years of schooling, both because our technological society has fewer and fewer places for semiskilled persons and because except for the military, there is no way to absorb this population into the working force. All this acts to prevent the attainment of adult independence until a later and later age.

It was already evident in the fifties that adolescents had no useful place in our society. And, eventually, it was the counterculture that compensated them emotionally for their functional expulsion. Vocationally, however, nothing has happened to improve the problem. In order to feel decent self-respect, youth must be able to work and contribute, but where is work to be found?

In the next era, society must address itself, somehow, to providing our vast numbers of youth with meaningful work roles through which they can actualize their hu-

manistic ideals in practical ways. President Kennedy grasped some of this need and deployed it constructively in the Peace Corps idea but this has been useful only to college graduates. VISTA does not seem to be broad enough to make a dent in the problem.

Yet so many unmet needs cry out for organized effort to fulfill them. Despite our concerns about the energy crisis, still, our cities must be regenerated and beautified; parks must be provided and maintained and kept safe; streams must be cleaned and made into recreational resources; forests must be preserved and rebuilt.

Our human resources must be cared for too. In fact, with the needs of society moving less toward the consumption of even more unneeded goods and more toward social services, we will approach a time when half the society will need to be employed taking care of the other half. Fortunately, these caretaking occupations provide just the kinds of fulfillment of humanistic ideals that both youth and society need.

Manpower development in the country is now entering an era when the needs of society and of youth will no longer harmonize happily with the needs of private industry. The calls from the White House to solve our problems by simply having everyone return to the good old American work ethic show no recognition of what the trouble is all about. As we see it, the economic and professional frontiers of opportunity are no longer expanding. The "developed" society has now closed in upon its young and makes them superfluous unless they aspire only to continue the status quo.

The role of the work ethic must change as society changes. We

must find ways to train and employ masses of our young people in satisfying work roles that do not require prolonged, expensive college educations. Vocational training at subprofessional and paraprofessional levels should be promoted by governmental programming, because in many fields these are needs that are not in the area of private interest to fulfill. Yet we have been witnessing an attempt by the Administration to reduce funds for vocational education, along with an elimination of the humanistic effort!

We must look at the problems of work and of underemployment not mainly in terms of numbers and jobs but in terms of the suitability of work as a life-style. It is not just the poor who must be provided with jobs and enabled to believe in the worthwhileness of a work ethic. The liberal youth of the middle-class have now become ideologically impoverished and unable to believe in the old work ethic.

We have the means of making our country a happier place in which to live and work, but we have yet to organize our resources toward the qualitative ends. The youth are powerless to do it, and they see the adults as not only powerless but either unaware or opposed. Does this have to be? Do we not now more than ever need to push for renewed emphasis on humanism in American life—this time not only from a base of youthful revolt but, rather, from an enlightened adult dedication? □